R8780-1

PRRC emerging trends

Published by the Princeton Religion Research Center

March 1992

Volume 14, No. 3 ISSN 0889-8936

Final 1991 Data Show an Upswing in the Importance of Religion in People's Lives

Final 1991 survey measurements all appear to be pointing towards a modest upswing in religious attitudes and behavior. One key measurement — how important a role people say religion plays in their own lives — epitomizes this movement. Nearly six persons in 10 (58 percent) said religion is very important in their lives. An additional 29 percent said it is fairly important, while just 13 percent maintained religion is not very important in their lives.

Between 1991 and 1990, the proportion of people saying religion is very important rose two percentage points from 56 percent to 58 percent. More importantly, this marks a continuation of a slow but steady increase since 1987, when the sense of the importance of religion was at a low point and just 53 percent said it was very important to them. There is still a long way to go, however, to match the record high which occurred in 1952, when three persons in four (75 percent) said religion is very important in their lives.

The profile of those saying religion is very important in their lives is not uniform. Women (66 percent) are far more likely than men (48 percent) to attach great importance to religion. Men (18 percent) are twice as likely as women (8 percent) to say it is not very important to them.

Non-whites (75 percent), and especially black Americans (82 percent), are the most likely people of all races to feel religion occupies a central place in their lives. In comparison, just 55 percent of whites feel the same way.

The sense of importance grows as people mature. Less than half of those under 30 (46 percent) believe religion is very important to them. A slight majority of 54 percent of people 30 to 49 say it is very important, but among those who are 50 and older, 70 percent consider religion of great importance in their lives.

Where one lives also makes a difference. People who live in the South (69 percent) or Midwest (56 percent) are more likely than those residing in the East (52 percent) or the West to view religion as very important.

Protestants (65 percent) are somewhat more likely than Catholics (55 percent) to consider religion very important in their lives.

Trend — Those Who Say Religion Is "Very Important" in Their Lives

1991	58%
1990	56
1989	55
1988	54
1987	53
1986	55
1985	55
1984	56
1983	56
1982	56
1981	56
1980	55
1978	52
1965	70
1952	75

Special Issue — Final 1991 Religion Data

This issue presents the final 1991 Gallup data for church membership, attendance, confidence in organized religion, and the importance of religion in people's lives. Greater statistical detail on these measurements and others will be found in ***Religion in America 1992*** *which is scheduled for publication in May.*

Do Recessions Drive People To the Pews ... or Away?

One of the questions we have been asked most often during the current economic recession has been, "do people go to church more often or less often when the economy is going through a rough period?" The answer is that when the economy takes a nose-dive the collection plate may be lighter, but the pews usually contain neither fewer nor more congregants.

The historical record shows very minor swings, if any, in both church attendance and membership when the economy either goes boom or bust.

Looking at the past four decades, there have been nine nationwide economic recessions. The difference in church attendance between the recession and the year preceding it has never exceeded two percentage points. During three of the recessions, including the current one, attendance at worship services rose slightly. On two occasions it declined, but during the remaining four recessions attendance remained unchanged.

Similarly, when the economy has recovered from recessions in the past, there was a slight increase in church attendance on two occasions, a decline at two other times, but after four of the recessions there was no change whatsoever.

The evidence for 1991, suggests there actually may have been a modest gain in church membership during the current recession. This is only the second time this has occurred during economic downturns in the past four decades. On three past occasions there was a slight decline in membership, and four times it held steady.

Once past recessions were over, church membership for the most part stayed the same. During economic recoveries in the past no change was registered on six occasions, and there was just one increase and one decrease in the number of people claiming church membership.

It must be emphasized that all of these fluctuations consist of only a percentage point or two at the most, and statistically speaking, may represent nothing more than the random variations of survey sampling procedures.

Past inquiries on why people are attending church more or less often seldom have found that reduced economic circumstances are given as a reason. Indeed, people are far more likely to say that the kind of increased work schedules and economic activities usually associated with a thriving economy prevent them from attending church or maintaining their membership in it.

Attendance and membership do not appear to be a matter of wealth or income. There is little difference among people from different economic strata in their tendency to attend churches or to join them as members.

The least affluent members of our society, especially those from minority groups, usually are hit first and hardest by recessions. The further deterioration of their economic status, however, is unlikely to have adverse impact on their religious activity, because frequently they are the people in our country who have the strongest faith, and to whom religion is most important. If anything, continued church attendance and membership probably helps them to endure their hardships.

The results on attendance and membership are based on surveys taken throughout the year to smooth out seasonal variations. The total number of interviews for any given year can range from a minimum of 5,000 interviews to as many as 30,000.

Methodology

The surveys reported in this issue were all conducted by the Gallup Organization through personal or telephone interviews with representative nationwide samples of adults, ages 18 and older.

The interviewing generally was spread throughout 1991, to minimize seasonal impacts of the religious calendar. Here are the sample sizes:

- 2,012 people were interviewed about their confidence in the church or organized religion.
- 5,038 were asked if they are now members of a church or a synagogue and if they attended worship services last week.
- 9,265 were asked to rate the importance of religion in their own lives.

Church Membership Up in 1991

Church membership has been going up and down like a see-saw in recent years, but the number of people who said they are members of a church, synagogue in 1991 increased over the previous year.

Over two adults in three (68 percent) claimed church membership in surveys taken throughout 1991. This represents a three percentage-point increase over the previous year when just 65 percent said they were members.

There has been a slight decline over the years since 1937, when 73 percent of Americans said they were members. The highest claims of membership were registered in the period of 1943–1947, when three adults in four (76 percent) said they were formally affiliated with a religious congregation.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP TREND

Do you happen to be a member of a church or synagogue?

	Member
1991	68%
1990	65
1989	69
1988	65
1987	69
1986	69
1985	71
1965	73
1952	73
1947	76
1943	76
1940	72
1937	73

The older people are, the more likely they are to join a church. Six in 10 (60 percent) of those who are under age 30 claim membership, but the proportion rises to two in three (67 percent) of those who are in the 30–49 age bracket. Three in four (76 percent) of those who are 50 or older, say they are church members.

Women are more likely than men to join the church, by a margin of 72 percent to 64 percent.

Membership is higher among non-whites (74 percent) than among whites (67 percent). The highest level of church membership is found among black adults (80 percent).

By education, college graduates are slightly more likely than those with less education to belong to the church. Similarly, people with high incomes also are more likely to join the church. In this respect it should be pointed out, however, that most surveys show that people with less education and income often have deeper levels of religious faith and commitment than those who have had the benefit of higher education and income levels.

Regionally, church membership is highest in the South, where three adults in four (76 percent) belong. Easterners (69 percent) and midwesterners (71 percent) are slightly above average in their tendency to join the church, but residents of West are well below average, with only 54 percent saying they are church members.

Catholics (78 percent) somewhat more often than Protestants (73 percent) say they hold membership in their church.

It is important to understand that individual claims of church membership may differ from official church statistics. Some churches, for example, consider people to be members for life even though their visits to the church may be few and far between. Some individuals may consider themselves members of a church even though they may not meet formal membership requirements.

CHURCH MEMBER PROFILE

	1991
NATIONAL	68%
Gender	
Male	64
Female	72
Age	
18–29	60
30–49	67
50 and older	76
Education	
College graduate	71
Attended college	68
High school graduate	68
Non-high school grad	66
Race	
White	67
Non-white	74
Black	80
Religious preference	
Protestant	73
Catholic	78
Region	
East	69
Midwest	71
South	76
West	54

Church Attendance Constant

Slight increase noted in 1991

While local pastors and church leaders may worry about declines in religious service attendance or exalt over bulging pews, attendance from a national perspective has been remarkably constant for the past several decades. The final figures for 1991 show it was no different in this respect.

During a typical week in 1991, over four adults in 10 (42 percent) attended worship services at least once. This represents a two percentage-point increase over 1990, when 40 percent reported attendance.

Since 1967, annual measurements of attendance have always fallen within the range of 40 to 43 percent. The highest levels of attendance recorded since these measurements began were found in 1955 and 1958, when nearly half the population (49 percent) went to church during a typical week. The lowest attendance was found in 1940 when just 37 percent attended.

ATTENDANCE PROFILE

Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?

1991	42%
1990	40
1989	43
1988	42
1987	40
1985	42
1982	41
1972	40
1962	46
1958	49
1950	39
1940	37
1939	41

Attendance is strongest among residents of the South (48 percent) and Midwest (45 percent). In the East, attendance drops to 40 percent, of the population and only one person in three (34 percent) in the West goes to church during the typical week.

Non-whites (50 percent), especially blacks (55 percent), are more likely to go to church than are whites.

There generally are more women at church (46 percent) than men (39 percent).

Impact of Age

Attendance also increases as people grow older. Only about one person in three (35 percent) under age 30 attends church. In the middle age years of 30 to 49, attendance increases to 41 percent of the age bracket, and about half of those who are 50 and older (49 percent) attend. This age pattern has been consistent over the years, and as the baby boom population matures, it is anticipated that church attendance will swell in the future as a result of the increased presence of graying baby boomers in the overall population.

A majority of Catholics (51 percent) during 1991 said they attended church the previous week. Slightly fewer Protestants (45 percent) also attended.

College graduates (46 percent) were more likely than others (41 percent) to have attended church or synagogue.

People in the middle income bracket are slightly more likely to have attended church than were those from other levels of income.

ATTENDANCE PROFILE

	1990
NATIONAL	42%
Gender	
Male	39
Female	46
Age	
18–29	35
30–49	41
50 and older	49
Education	
College graduate	46
Attended college	41
High school graduate	42
Non-high school grad	41
Household income	
Under $20,000	40
$20,000–$29,999	42
$30,000–$49,999	45
$50,000 or more	42
Race	
White	41
Non-white	50
Black	55
Religious preference	
Protestant	45
Catholic	51
Region	
East	40
Midwest	45
South	48
West	34

Public Slowly Regaining Confidence in Organized Religion

Up until about 1985, about two Americans in three expressed high confidence in the church or organized religion, and usually placed it ahead of institutions from the secular world. Then there began a series of critical events that led to widespread disillusionment with organized religion.

Greatest publicity was given to scandals about the shortcomings of televangelists, but there were other issues as well. Many Protestants protested against ultraliberal movements within their denominations towards such reforms as gay marriages and ordination; "politically correct" reform of the language of the Bible, hymns and liturgy; and similar reforms. Other Protestants were dissatisfied with ultraconservative movements such as the "moral majority" and "right to life." Similarly, many Catholics were divided between those who viewed the Vatican as out of step with modern reality, and those who dissented with some American bishops whose liberal beliefs they thought had gone too far beyond the cherished traditions of their church. In addition, in recent years there has been a general decline in confidence for all institutions in American life.

The low point in confidence in the church was reached in 1989, when only a bare majority of 52 percent of Americans still said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in it.

The number of people who have high confidence in the church, however, rebounded in 1990 to 56 percent, and the final figures for 1991 show a further increase to 58 percent.

Still dissatisfied in 1991, were 26 percent who said they have only "some" confidence and 12 percent who have "very little." Undecided on the matter are 4 percent of the population. Among those most likely to express high confidence in the church are women (61 percent), people who are age 50 or older (62 percent), and those who failed to complete high school (65 percent). Less often expressing confidence are men (53 percent), those under age 50 (55 percent), and college graduates (52 percent).

Blacks (71 percent) are far more likely than whites (56 percent) to hold the church in esteem. Protestants (65 percent) are somewhat more likely than Catholics (58 percent) to express confidence in the church.

Churches in the South (67 percent) and Midwest (59 percent) are probably more likely to receive approval from their parishioners than those in the East (52 percent) or West (48 percent).

TREND

	Great deal or quite a lot of confidence
1991	58%
1990	56
1989	52
1988	59
1987	61
1986	57
1985	66
1979	65
1973	66

PROFILE

	Great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church
NATIONAL	58%
Gender	
Male	53
Female	61
Age	
18–29	55
30–49	55
50 and older	62
Education	
College graduate	52
Attended college	55
High school grad	58
Non-H.S.I grad	65
Race	
White	56
Non-white	67
Black	71
Religious preference	
Protestant	65
Catholic	58
Region	
East	52
Midwest	59
South	67
West	48

Announcing 1992 Religion in America Report

The soon to be published **Religion in America Report** marks the 25th anniversary of the initiation of these regular and eagerly-awaited publications, which present facts and interpretations of the latest trends in religious beliefs and practices, as well as the public's changing views on the impact of religion on society.

Many of the indicators reported have become the basic standard measurements of organized religion in the United States.

This report will present a detailed analysis of church attendance and membership by key population groups, and by major faiths and denominations. A special commentary by George Gallup, Jr. will set forth the major challenges and growing opportunities facing churches in the immediate years ahead.

If you preach, write, or teach, we sincerely believe you will find this PRRC publication to be a constant aid in your mission.

Special pre-publication offer: Those who order **Religion in America, 1992** before May 1, will also receive a free copy of **100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America.** Written by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones, this book contains 100 of the most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion.

This book, which represents the distillation of many recent Gallup surveys, deals in depth with each of 100 topics – analysis by key demographic groups, trends, background information and tables. Selections include religious belief and ethics, religion and politics, religious experience and spiritual development and commitment.

To receive **Religion in America 1992** and your complimentary copy of **100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America** send your check or money order for $30 to Princeton Religion Research Center, 47 Hulfish Street, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542.

EMERGING TRENDS is published monthly except July and August by the PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER. The Center, founded in 1977, is an inter-faith non-denominational research organization with headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. The PRRC specializes in creative actionable research, utilizing the world-wide attitudinal and behavioral facilities of Gallup International. The purpose of the PRRC is to gain a better understanding of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the United States and abroad and to explore ways this information can enable religious leaders to promote spiritual growth. A one-year subscription can be obtained for $35.00. Inquire: **Publications Department, P.O. Box 389, 47 Hulfish Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08542 (Telephone 609/921-8112). POSTMASTER: PLEASE NOTIFY US OF ADDRESS CHANGE.**

PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER
47 Hulfish Street, Suite 213
P.O. Box 389
Princeton, New Jersey 08542

FIRST CLASS
POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 175
Plainsboro, NJ 08536

First Class Mail